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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of learner-authored texts to encourage conceptual change in college English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, examining the process of and conditions for conceptual change and reasons to promote the use of student-authored texts. Participants were first-year accounting majors enrolled in a comprehensive EFL course that integrated listening, speaking, reading, and writing in curriculum. Texts used in discussion were from a mini-inquiry project on the concept of extracurricular activities for college students. Students worked in research groups to investigate ideas related to the topic through group discussion, consultation of reference materials, interviews, and surveys. They reported their findings and thoughts individually, then exchanged them with other group members, comparing their own interpretations with those of others. They mapped the different ideas with their prior knowledge. Each group rendered two maps regarding categorization, advantages, and disadvantages of extracurricular activities. Researchers created two collective concept maps involving the concepts shared by all class participants. Results suggest that using student-written texts to foster EFL learners' conceptual change was an effective instructional strategy. Students reported that the insights peer texts revealed were helpful in understanding content knowledge, evoking them to reflect on the influence of reading and writing on conceptual change. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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The Blind Leading the Blind?
Using Learner-authored Texts to Foster Conceptual Change in College EFL Learners'

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Introduction

Central to the literacy instruction is to foster students' conceptual change through their transactions with the texts. Learning takes place when new information is assimilated to the student's prior knowledge base or the existing schema is reconstructed to accommodate those messages. In this process, text, as one of the major media to transmit knowledge, is entrusted with the crucial responsibility to facilitate understanding and learning.

The selection of proper reading materials has been a problem plaguing most classroom teachers. In the EFL domain where learners command limited English proficiency, the priority concern is assumed to be given to the reduction of difficulties in order to enhance the accessibility of the text by " providing culturally relevant information" (Carell & Eisterhold, 1987, p.227). Yet, the concept of "relevance" is subject to individual variations. As K. Goodman (1979) claims, no writer can entirely take into account the " range of the differences among all potential readers of a given text" (p.658).

In actual learning context, text is often regarded as a synonym of textbook (Armbruster, 1984). The dominance of textbook in curriculum tends to camouflage its instructional limits for individual learners. As textbook writing has been largely the privilege of textbook writers and editor who may be the outsiders of classroom, they are prone to overlook student's actual level of conceptual maturity, thereby imposing unreasonable cognitive demands on learners.

This paper discusses the use of learner-authored texts as a strategy to impel learners' conceptual change. The issues addressed include the process of and the conditions for conceptual change and the reasons to promote the use of student-written texts. An approach of implementation based on my classroom practice is documented.

Conceptual Change: Processes and Conditions

In this paper, conceptual change is understood as a cognitive process in which the learner reconstructs his/her schema so as to accommodate new information. This operational definition implies dual consistence between learner's conceptions and the new information. On the one hand, the learner's prior knowledge should be adapted so that it is compatible with the new information. On the other hand, the student's conception of the new information should be true to what it actually implies. The purpose of effecting conceptual change is to develop the learner's cognitive capacity that would help him or her to improve the quality and efficacy of understanding.

Processes

Kelly & Green (1998) argue from a sociocultural perspective that conceptual change is both an individual and group process. The individual's conception evolves along the interactions with other group members. The various types of social discourse in different

disciplines serve as the source for one's acquisition of new knowledge and the basis for one's revision of schema. The group process, which builds on interactions among individuals, develops a set of related ideas that constitute the "local knowledge' (p.147) shared by group members. This variety of knowledge concerns the "norms and expectations, roles and relationships, and rights and obligations" that are supposed to be observed by group members " in the construction of everyday life" (p.153). The sustaining group creates a collective conceptual ecology that influences the individual conceptual ecology.

It is of importance to note that the shared knowledge is constantly undergoing reconstruction as the interactions between the individual and the group carry on. The individual ecology, as an autonomous entity, has a well-developed infrastructure and belief systems that are not easy to be altered. An individual may choose to accept certain knowledge while disregarding some other given it interferes with one's beliefs. Nevertheless, as researchers (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorn, 1989) find, individual's selective adoption of the knowledge does not necessarily affect one's personal relationship to the group for one can still perform a functional participation without changing one's schema. The content of the shared knowledge evolves in the direction where individual orientations converge.

This finding reveals that conceptual change cannot be effectively measured by learner's ulterior behavior which may belie their real conception. In some cases, their claims of understanding turn out to be misconceptions. According to my observation, EFL students approach a certain concept by decoding its literal meaning, instead of trying to make sense of it. When asked to answer multiple choice items, the choice they made

betrayed their misunderstanding. The following passage chosen from the test paper makes visible the "pseudo" conceptual change that EFL learners experience.

E-mail is a pipeline to thousands of experts on virtually everything; it is a means of meeting people with similar interests or problems. E-mail addresses---either names or on-line service account number--- automatically forward mail to the right place. Unlike U.S. "snail mail", as E-mailers derisively refers to it, a response can shoot back within hours, depending on how often the intended recipient checks in.

Which of the following statements is true according to the passage?

(a) E-mail is an underground pipeline used to link thousands of experts in every field of study.

(b) E-mail is means of communication.

(c) E-mail travels slowly.

(d) It takes hours to get the response by e-mail.

Among the 24 examinees in my class, 15 students chose (a); 2 (c); 4 (d); and only 3 learners chose (b), which is the right answer. In the follow-up interview, I inquired the students about their choice. The majority of those who chose (a) reported that they identified the first statement of the text as the topic sentence around which the rest of the paragraph centered. Those who thought (c) as the right answer justified that the pronoun "it" referred anaphorically to the "snail mail" that obviously travels slowly. Learners who chose (d) found the evidence in the last sentence.

As the findings indicate, identifying the concept by topic sentence appears to be the common knowledge that shapes the reasoning process of most learners. It is not because of the employment of the strategy that causes their misconception. Instead, it is because of students' failure to translate the metaphoric meaning of "pipeline", which has been invariably construed as the instrument to transport the water or oil. This common sense had led the majority of the students to regard (a) as the correct answer. They had thought the new information had been correctly comprehended, but only to find that their

interpretation contradicted with the meaning of e-mail when explanation was offered. Those who made the right choice drew on their personal experiences and found the contextual clues that told about the automatic forward of the mail which confirmed their assumption. Then they revisited and worked out the meaning of "pipeline" that had stood out as inconsistent information by referring to the clue supplied in the following sentence and thus adapting their conception.

Complications arise when alternative conceptions occur which are acceptable interpretations of new information, but not intended by the informant. As Anders & Guzzetti (1996) point out learners would "create unique understandings of a concept" (p.61) without making any alternations on their schemata. That is, the conception distracts from the expected direction and misunderstands a concept in a meaning way. The following excerpt illustrates the effects of alternative conceptions.

"What's the matter, Loll? Didn't he like it at school, then?"
"They never gave me the present."
"Present? What present?"
"They said they'd give me a present."
"Well, now. I'm sure they didn't."
"They did! They said: "You're Laurie Lee, aren't you? Well, just sit here for the present. I sat there all day, but I never got it. I ain't not going back there again."

(From Li (1987) A New English Course, Book II)

The concept "for the present" can be reasonably explained in two ways, meaning either for the time being or for the gift. The very ambiguity that could not be effectively eliminated by the contextual clues instills Lee to an illusion to expect a present that was not available. Since the alternative conception, which is pragmatically misfired, is, however, sound in logic, it is even harder to be transformed. Instead of making him to change his

attitude, Lee's sisters' persuasion reaped the opposite by reinforcing his original conception.

Conditions

Based on professional literature, (Tierney & Pearson, 1994a, 1994b; Goodman, 1994; Anders & Guzzetti, 1996) conditions for conceptual change are examined from two dimensions: the learner's affective and cognitive traits versus the textual characteristics.

Conceptual change presupposes the learner's schema engagement (Tierney & Pearson, 1994a) in the information processing. Only when a learner consciously activates his or her prior knowledge in approaching the text, could he or she find the relevance between the known and the knowing. A number of affective and cognitive factors have been highlighted that enact a significant role in schema engagement (Tierney & Pearson, 1994a; Elbrum, 1996). They include motivation, interest, and anxiety. Motivation denotes the psychological expectation that an individual entertains. The amount of mental effort that a learner invests on a learning task correlates positively with the degree of motivation. Research shows that reasonably high motivation is helpful to conceptual change. Interest is reflected in quality and quantity of learners' responses to a given text. The essential difference between motivation and interest is that a motivated student may show interest in a wide range of areas across the learning contexts whilst an interested learner perhaps maintains a more discriminate attitude toward the learning materials. Anxiety concerns the student's perceived threat to his or her power of conception (Ehbrum, 1996). Distinctions have been made between the debilitating anxiety, which obstructs learner's progress in conceptual evolution, and facilitating anxiety, which "mobilizes resource to accomplish a task" (Ehbrum, 1996, p.148).When the interactions among these three major factors evoke

the learner's dissatisfaction with his or her prior understandings, conceptual change is on the way.

For second language learners, especially adult learners, owing to their high level of anxiety (Krashen, 1981), conceptual change is often surrogated by a conceptual "cramming" that assimilates all the information they glean from the text. To ensure the accuracy of the understanding of the text, they decipher assiduously every part they read (Tierney & Pearson, 1994a) and end up with, more often than not, a chaotic jumble, devoid of structure and organization. This produces a discursive effect on learners' schemata. They often complain that their heads are spinning as a result of cognitive overload. One of my students feels extremely vulnerable to the learning of English vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Vocabulary and reading are the real tough jobs for me. I copied down all the new words and expressions in the text and tried to memorize it one by one. But when I finished the last one, I forgot the first one. So I had to go back to the very beginning again. More frustrating to me is that I couldn't identify the meaning of the words that I have learnt by heart in the context. It seems that the more I learnt, the more I got confused.

Smith (1994) maintains that "memorization interferes with the comprehension by monopolizing attention and reducing intelligibility" (p. 96). Obsessed with the mechanical memory work, he could hardly engage his schema in structuring the information he has exposed to. Unable to build the meaningful relationships among the individual words in the context, he resorted to the laborious rote learning technique to "cram" his cognitive frame with semi-comprehended information. The bulk of the information cannot by retained in the long-term memory because of its reduced intelligibility.

The notion of intelligibility has bearing on comprehensibility. Krashen (1981) defines the concept of comprehensible input as the message that can be understood by

learners. He stresses the importance of comprehensibility in second language acquisition. He warns that incomprehensible input, regardless of quantity, amounts to "noise" (p. 66). Differing from the readability formulas that measure the difficulty of the text by the computation of word frequency and sentence length (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996), comprehensibility speaks of the cognitive demand on individual learner. A text that is comprehensible to one reader may be cognitively challenging to another. Therefore, there is a need to develop individualized texts for learners with different cognitive capacity. Krashen (1981) recommends the oral discourse outside of the school setting as a valuable source of comprehensible input. This idea supports the use of student-written texts as comprehensible input to enhance conceptual performance.

The improvement of comprehensibility of the text is not achieved at the expense of the reduction of knowledge that is presumed to possessed by the reader in content areas. Rather, it explicates the assumed prior knowledge by making them physically perceivable. The substantiation of the details of the text proves to be conducive to learner's comprehension especially to those who command little background knowledge about the subject matter. The following two texts possess equal conceptual load, but differ in the way that information is organized.

(1) Vitamins enable human bodies to function healthily. Some vitamins are manufactured by the body itself, but most of them are obtained from the food eaten. Since no type of food contains all the needed vitamins, only a well-balanced diet that includes the "Basic Four" can provide all the necessary vitamins.

(2) Vitamins are chemical substances that we must have. Our bodies manufacture some vitamins, but most of them are obtained from the food we eat. As no one type of food contains the all the vitamins that we need, the diet of a normal healthy person should regularly include diary products, meats, fruits and cereal products.

Both of the two excerpts discuss the functions and sources of vitamins. The differences are that the first excerpt presumes that the reader understands the properties of vitamin and the concept of "basic four" whereas the second piece provides the reader with the above information so that no prior knowledge is required in understanding the meaning. To test the influence of text comprehensibility on learner's conception, I equally divided the whole class into two groups, handed out a different text to each group, and asked them to translate into Chinese. Students who worked on text (1) reported that they had difficulty in understanding the concept of "basic four" that does not seem to have a corresponding Chinese equivalent. No similar feedback was obtained from the group that worked on text (2).

The information structure of the text has a direct impact on students' comprehension, not only in the manipulation of prior knowledge, but also in the textual coherence. Armbruster (1984) identifies two approaches to describe the coherence: global coherence and local coherence. Global coherence is defined as "the integration of high level, important ideas across the entire section, chapter or book" (p.203). Local coherence refers to the use of the cohesive ties to "carry meaning across phrase, clause, and sentence boundaries" (p.209). This distinction is largely compatible with linguists' (Halliday, 1985; Crystal, 1985) differentiation of coherence and cohesion. Echoing the notion of global coherence, linguistic coherence indicates the unity of the meanings expressed by different parts of the text. Cohesion resembles local coherence and deals with the relation between the meaning and the linguistic forms (Crystal, 1985). There is also similarity between Armbruster's delineation of the types of cohesive ties and the devices of cohesion proposed by Halliday, as both model include reference, substitution, and conjunction. However, a

crucial point that seems to escape Armbruster is that there is no necessary cause-effect relationship between the two textual characteristics. That is, local coherence does not ensure global coherence. In a similar vein, global coherence does not rely on cohesive ties to achieve the unity of meaning. Let us analyze the following two examples.

The "Queen" was not successful for the music of the film may not have been right for the theme of the film; the director could have organized the plot more carefully; the actress may not have been quite right for her role as a queen; the actor's role ought to have larger, and the producer may not have had enough time to supervise the production. Perhaps the real cause is that they may not have enough money to make a truly successful film. But it was a fine movie.

(Adapted from Li (1987) A New English Course, Book II)

This passage is locally coherent in terms of the use of pronoun reference "it", substitution "movie' for film, and conjunction "for" and "but". Yet, not all parts of the text contribute to the controlling idea stated at the very beginning for the last sentence ruins the textual unity by arguing for the opposite. Another example:

Ann: That was such an interesting movie!

Bob: I must admit that I dozed off after the first thirty minutes.

In this case, there are no explicit cohesive ties employed to connect the ideas. But the message coded by Bob unequivocally suggests that he had no interest in that movie as our common sense enables us to infer the meaning from the context and perceive its implicit global coherence.

For instructional purposes, text should be, above all, globally coherent, all ideas linked to sustain the given theme, thereby providing learners with "a possible version of truth" (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996, p. 61) that facilitate their conceptual change. As for the concern of local coherence, EFL learners, with fewer reading strategies to draw on, depend

on explicit functional words to proceed along the flow of language so that it is better for the text to present the knowledge in a more organized fashion.

Reasons to Promote the Use of Student-Written Texts

The idea of using student-written texts as a supplementary learning resource originates from the assertion of applying multiple texts in instruction. In retrospect, Tierney &Pearson (1994b) realize the assumptions they made on learning and reading were based on the single-text premise, while neglecting the interaction among learners and the "several texts as they read, write, and research" (p.515). Guthrie, Bennet, & McGough (1994) argue that the use of multiple texts is helpful in improving students' independent problem-solving ability and in formulating their own concepts of learning strategies.

However, relatively fewer literatures have been devoted to the investigation of the possibility of using student-written texts in literacy instruction. In contrast, quite a number of studies question the validity of students' judgement. Jacobs (1987) reports that ESL teachers and learners feel apprehensive that student comment will produce misleading effects on learners' conception owing to their own cognitive and linguistic limits. Based on the survey about the ESL learners' attitudes toward peer opinions, and native speakers of English. Chaudron (1984) concludes that peer responses are less welcomed and respected than those of native speakers. Leki (1990) finds that ESL students are doubtful about the quality of peer comments despite their active engagement and attitudinal warmth. As ESL learners' judgements are imperfect, it sounds plausible to assume that their written texts are equally unreliable. The promotion of using student-written texts in teaching is commensurate with the advocacy of letting the blind lead the blind.

In spite of the fact that student-written texts are less ideal than the published texts, this paper argues that they provide, nevertheless, more comprehensible input that engage the students in conceptual change when they transact with the texts. The reasons to support the argument are four folds.

First, as mentioned earlier, conceptual change is brought about by the engagement of schema. The meaning emerges from the dynamic transactions between the reader and the text (Goodman, 1994). The reader reconstructs the meaning of the text by activating his/her preconceptions. In the very process of reconstructing, the reader negotiates new information with his or her current schema, and creates a reader's text based on his or her mental representation of the writer's text. The single text has been extended into dual texts (Goodman, 1994) as a result of the reader's conception. Goodman (1994) recognizes the potential difficulty for readers to transact with a published text with stable physical properties. While it is theoretically possible for the reader to regard the published text as an on-going process rather than an end product, readers, especially EFL readers, are more apt to "learn from the text" rather than "learn with the text", owing to the control of print. Instead of reading for meaning, they are absorbed in gleaming information from the given text, which proves to be ineffective in locating the focus of the text. As unpublished manuscripts, student-written texts impose less authority on the reader, establishing equal relationship with the reader for a constructive dialogue. The reader does not feel obliged to accept the writer's ideas and alter his or her schema before truly understanding and adequately negotiating with the new information. The physical presence of an immediate writer ensures a prompt feedback to the reader's response, enabling the reader to launch further inquiries.

Second, conceptual change builds on a self-critical revaluation of one's judgement and values. It has been discussed previously that learners may participate in conceptual events while remaining detached from the schema change. This may be partly due to the reason of their cognitive inertia in performing the learning tasks so that their initiatives in bringing about conceptual change lie dormant. Therefore, classroom practices must be geared to eliciting students' conceptual conflicts that arouse their metacongnitive awareness to reexamine their schema so as to restore the consistence in conception. The task of composing texts to share with other class members confronts the students with clarification of and the articulation of their thoughts. In most cases, learners need to substantiate their knowledge base by consulting reference materials. Hence, the act of writing involves conceptual change. When the texts are analyzed and discussed in class, students experience a second conceptual alternation, thus expediting the cycle of conceptual change.

Third, the use of student-written texts represents the respect of students' rights to their own texts and their initiative in effecting conceptual change. Knoblauch & Brannon (1982) assert that the teacher response to students' writing should be oriented to empower them with the control of " what they want to say" (p.159) in order to bridge the gap between their actual wording and their intended scripts. Students' writing should not be evaluated with reference to the standards of ideal text in which teachers have faith. In light of this argument, learners' texts are best to be employed as a medium for conceptual change.

Fourth, as EFL learners are assumed to have a comparatively low level of awareness of using prior knowledge, which is encoded in first language, in second language reading

(Carrell & Eisterhold, 1987), this part of knowledge is usually inactivated until incentives are available. Peer texts are a good source of incentive that helps learners to retrieve their prior knowledge. Anderson & Pearson (1984) describe three functions that prior knowledge enacts in reading comprehension. First, it serves as the basis for the reader to make inferences about their reading. Second, it enables the reader to select the important information to focus on. Third, it facilitates reader's recall of the information stored in the long-term memory. All these three functions work together to link the known information with the new information. Conceptual change is, in a way, an expansion and reorganization of the prior knowledge. Without its engagement, new conceptions would have no affiliation and consequently dangle from the existing schema.

It should be pointed out that the use of student-written texts does not suggest a blind acceptance of all the ideas in the text. Indeed, to have the power to inform learners existing schemata, they are supposed to be scrutinized and edited. In this process, the teacher plays the role of mentor, facilitator, and organizer, offering the learner guideline and advice, helping them to plan a strategy for the investigation of a given topic and checking the progress of the written work, and conducting class and group discussions on the written products. Hence, this activity is carried out through the concerted efforts between the students and the teacher.

Toward an Approach of Practice

Context

The participants of this activity were 32 first-year accounting majors who were enrolled in my Comprehensive EFL course that integrates listening, speaking, reading and writing in curriculum. The texts used in discussion were the products of a mini-inquiry

project on the concept of extracurricular activities for college students. The research questions included the categorization of the extracurricular activities that college students typically have, and the analysis of the their advantages and disadvantages. Students worked in research groups that were formed on a voluntary basis, embarking on the investigation of the ideas that were related to the given topic through group discussion, consultation of reference materials, interview and surveys. They were supposed to report their findings and thoughts individually. When they finished their projects, they exchanged them with other members of the group, comparing their own interpretations with those of others and noting down the differences on think sheets. Then they mapped the different ideas with their prior knowledge. Each group was required to render two maps regarding the categorization of and the advantages and disadvantages of extracurricular activities. Based on that, we created two collective concept maps that involved the conceptions shared by all class participants. Finally, participants were interviewed about their responses to the activity.

The Choice of the Inquiry Topic and the Framing of Research Questions

As stated in the conditions for conceptual change, the learning material should be motivational to most learners so that they would actively participant in the project and contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way. For first-year college undergraduates who are curious about the campus life, an inquiry of the range of activities outside their academic program may have the potential to stimulate their interest. Given the schema change is actualized by the gradual categorical complexity (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), the research questions were framed to direct learners' attention to the formulation of

categories in reporting their findings. The way that learner categorize extracurricular activities is also "applicable" (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996, p.61) to other similar concepts.

Planning for the Investigation of the Inquiry Project

The group configuration was initiated by students. To avoid the confound effect of gender on the inquiry process, I assigned the four males students to different groups. Each group was required to furnish a master plan that addressed the goals of the study, the methods they would employ to collect and analyzed information, a tentative timeline and the areas of need in relation to the planning and conducting of the study. This master plan was substantiated by individual learner's description of intended practice. Each group received extensive responses from the other groups and the teacher and made revisions on their goals and methods. Group configuration and group membership were subject to change as participants' interest goals and needs varied.

Findings indicated that students not only pursued the goal of fulfilling course requirement, but also cared about the influence of extracurricular activities on their personal and academic growth. They viewed this project as an inquiry on their beliefs and values. The methods they suggested for data collection and data analysis included group discussion, consultation of reference materials, interviews with instructors, student leaders, or students of higher-grade levels, and surveys. Most participants were concerned with the presentation of the product of the project. An expository writing format was provided. In the first part, students were supposed to define the concept of extracurricular activity, and to classify it according to the categories that had been generated. In the second part, they were recommended to explore the advantages and disadvantages of extracurricular activities. In the third part, make a brief evaluation of extracurricular activities.

Generation of Learner-authored Texts

Following the suggested format, students reported their findings and thoughts that emerged from their investigations. One student, Sha, made distinctions between on-campus extracurricular activities and off-campus extracurricular activities.

In my opinion, extracurricular activities exist in two domains: on campus and off campus. The former one includes clubs, societies, sports, and so on. The latter one refers to the students' social involvement, like the promotion of sales, private tutoring, or doing other routine jobs, such as working as shop assistants, typists, or secretaries.

This categorization had been accepted by all the participants and was later employed as two coordinate concepts in the collective conceptual mapping. In analyzing the advantages of extracurricular activities, while most participants focused on their usefulness in improving learners' universal skills in dealing with interpersonal relationships, Ma elaborated on their effects in serving individual needs of development, thereby generating new avenues for exploration.

Extracurricular activity is another class for you to study out of school. It is more lively and free. It includes many fields in which young people are interested. As you know, you cannot find two leaves of the same size in the world. Every one is unique. Extracurricular activities can enlarge your vision and develop your interest freely.

Her use of leaf metaphor drove home the variation among individual learners who were provided with more freedom for personal development by participating in extracurricular activities.

Compared with the strong analysis of the advantages of the extracurricular activities, the exploration of the disadvantages appeared much weaker for students could

not find reasonable grounds to build their argument. Gu, however, resorted to statistics he collected through interview and survey to convince the reader.

We should not pay all attention to extracurricular activities as our main purpose is to study. Some activities are just meaningless entertainment. Some are much too time-consuming so that they appropriate students' time for study. As statistics show, college students who spend six hours per week on extracurricular activities on average score 0.5 lower in grade point average than those who spend three hours per week.

All the participants make positive appraisals of extracurricular activities. Drawing on the English adage that speaks of the balance between work and play, Wu strongly urged the students to participate actively in extracurricular activities.

They will make your college life more happy and colorful. Maybe you have heard such an English saying that "All work and no play make Jack a dull boy". It means that students cannot study all day long. Instead, he should find time to join extracurricular activities that provide him with enjoyment, relaxation and knowledge. As college students, we should realize the importance of the fusion of study and play.

Group Discussion

After the completion of the inquiry project, learners exchanged their work with other members of the group, comparing each other's work and noting down the differences in the think sheet (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996).

Think Sheet		
Extracurricular Activities	**My Conception**	**Peers' Conceptions**
Categories		
Advantages		
Disadvantages		
Evaluations		

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Participants were encouraged to question others' conception before they made the decision. In the following excerpt of discussion that had been tape-recorded and transcribed, Zhu proposed an alternative understanding of the concept of study at college.

Zhu (male):I think that your composition is very well-organized except ..for the point you made in the last paragraph. You put study in …antagonism to extracurricular activities.

Qian (female): They are two different things, I think,… aren't they?

Zhu: I see the connection between them. I think study at the college level should include both the intracurricular activities and extracurricular activities. They can't be separated.

Qian: Sounds reasonable. I haven't thought of that.

In the last paragraph, Qian wrote:

As students, our primary task is study. So we should not devote all our time and energy to extracurricular activities.

Zhu's suggestion made Qian reconsider her conception of study at college. However, there was no true-false relationship between these two conceptions in this case. Zhu interpreted the concept in a more holistic perspective that stressed the social nature of learning, whilst Qian inclined to a more focused view that delimited the domain of study within the boundary of academia.

Collective Concept Mapping

In the process of discussion, each group contributed collaborative concept maps to class contributions. Based on the group contribution, we worked out collective conceptual maps that reflected the common conceptions shared by all the class participants. Figure 1 describes with the types of extracurricular activities. Figure 2 portrays the advantages and disadvantages of extracurricular activities.

Student Responses

This activity proved to be successful for most participants. In the follow-up interview, students reported that the insights the peer texts revealed were not only helpful in gaining a better understanding of the content knowledge, but also evoked them to reflect on the influence of reading and writing on their conceptual change. One student reported:

I find it especially useful in the sense that it provides me with the opportunity to critically examine my thinking process.

Another participant commented:

The thing I find useful in reading peer texts is to follow and understand their train of thoughts that informs my conception.

The experience of composing texts for group discussion increased learners' sense of responsibility and the depth of thinking. One participant reflected:

I used to write without the sense of the reader, I assumed that the reader must be at least as knowledgeable as I. I do not need to explain everything clearly enough. The presence of the reader helped me to clarify my thinking and the articulation of ideas.

As participants suggested, this activity contributed to the creation of a cooperative learning community that engaged every member in learning through productive interactions.

Summary

Using student-written texts to foster EFL learners' conceptual change is an effective instructional strategy. It integrates the reading and writing process and utilizes them as the media for conceptual change. While promoting the employment of this strategy, this paper acknowledges the potential limits in developing learners' vocabulary and syntactic maturity in the target language. What it asserts is that the meaning should be held in priority in second language acquisition. As the comprehensibility of the input affects students' construction of meaning, student-written texts appears to be an appropriate vehicle for EFL learner's conceptual growth.

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Figure 1
Extracurricular Activities for College Students

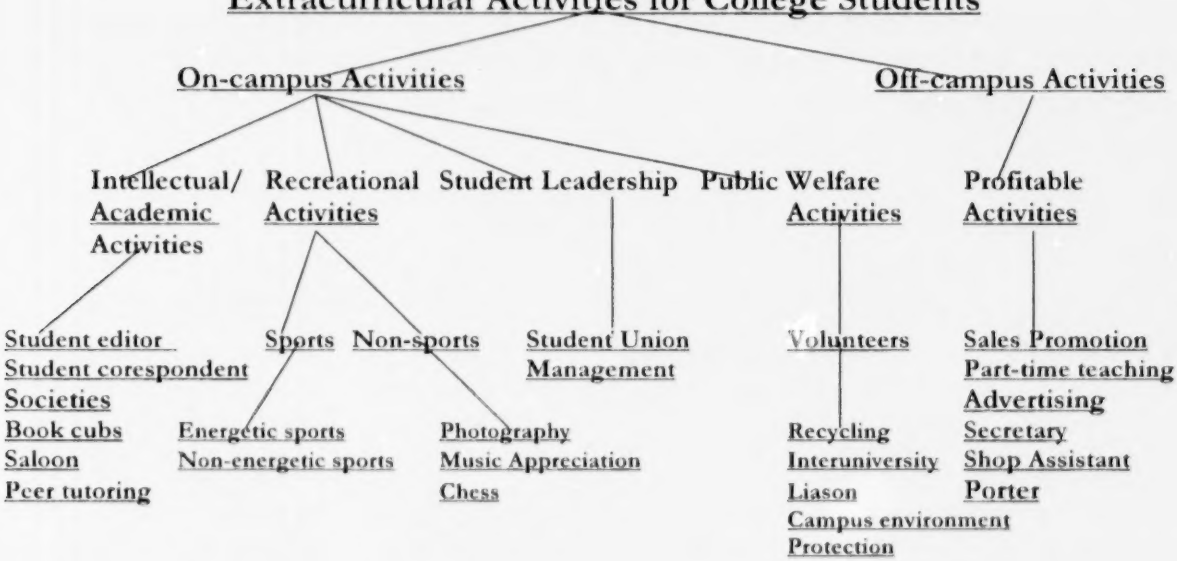
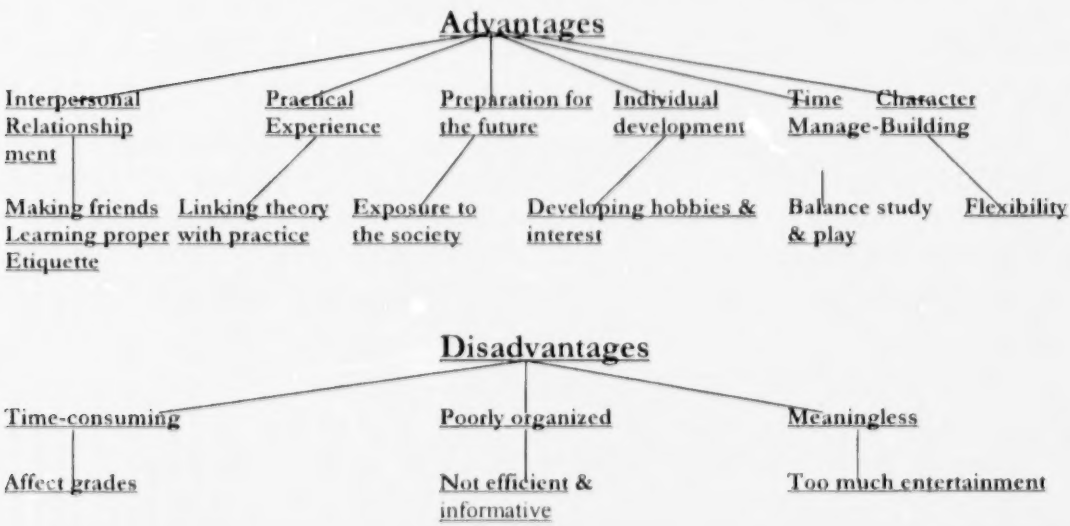


Figure 2
Extracurricular Activities for College Students



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Yuanzhong Zhang

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